

SHIFTING SANDS

A NOVELETTE

BY ELEANOR M. INGRAM

CHAPTER I.

The Girl in the Desert.

THE private car of Mr. Robert Arden rocked on the smooth Mexican roadbed, swaying from side to side as the train sped across the level desert. Billy Graeme leaned forward and patted Miss Arden's shoulder with the cheerful comradery of one young American toward another.

"Feelin' better?" he inquired sympathetically. "When you an' I start out on our honeymoon, Trix, I'll take you around New York and back. Travelin' is too strenuous for you."

"It was that horrid pulque that made my head ache," his *fiancée* corrected. "Why did you and papa coax me to taste it? You always look so innocent when you are getting into mischief, Billy! It must be because you are a bit plump, and have blue eyes and yellow hair—and because you use such frightful English."

"There's nothin' wrong with my English," he returned with complacency. "Can't be; I learned it when a child. Trix, would you mind very much if I stopped off a day or two, an' followed you up later at Mexico City? You see, I noticed a scene for a magazine cover, a few miles back, that filled me with longin' to get it into my portfolio an' then transfer it to my check-book."

Beatrice Arden laughed. She was a slim, dimpled girl, with the apple-blossom purity of complexion that is the

prerogative of the auburn-haired beauty. She had the chicness of the woman whose clothes are made in Paris or New York, and her warm, shining waves of hair were parted and brought down over her ears in a mass of coiled braids according to the latest whim of fashion. But her clear brown eyes had the unspoiled candor of a boy's.

"Not at all," she assured him. "Why should I?"

"I didn't know but you might suffer at partin' with me, Juliet."

"Well, I have seen you nearly every day of my life, so far, and I am going to see you all the rest of it, so I will try to bear the separation. But I don't see why you wear yourself out drawing advertisements and covers for magazines when you do not need to do so. We will always have money enough."

"I'm not goin' to live on my wife's money," he quickly retorted. "Besides, I love my arr-t! That latest advertisement I made for Peaches' soap was a masterpiece—the manager of the company told me it increased their sales ten per cent. If you an' I ever get hard up I'll do a picture of you issuin' from a jar of Ponce de Leon Beauty Cream that will keep the wolf from our garage door for months. Will you pose?"

"When I see the wolf. Meanwhile, you may go back and sketch your magazine cover."

"Thank you. I will, to-morrow. This isn't a good place for gettin' off."

"I should like it!" exclaimed Beatrice under her breath.

He glanced at her, then at the scene.

The train was speeding across a vast, mountain-bounded plain, an expanse of sand frost-white under the intense tropical moonlight, except where clumps of cactus splotched it with dark. The strange, desert fascination overlay the silent spaces, crying out to the strangers like a voice, the lure of the unknown to the overcivilized.

Gradually the interest in Billy Graeme's expression deepened to absorption; he leaned forward, intent on the unfolding panorama. The girl rested her round white arms on the railing, losing herself in contemplation.

For the first time in her life she felt discontent, a quivering impatience with all things, and a thirsty desire for something she did not know and could not hope to know. A great many possibilities lay dormant in her soft young face. She gave the impression of one capable of deep feeling, but of whom nothing but good-humored acquiescence ever had been required.

"Trix," Billy murmured, at last.

Without turning, she put out her hand. Her *fiancé* absently took the small fingers into his clasp, still gazing at the desert.

"Trix," he mused, "if there was was only a coyote out there, I could use the idea for Wolf's Sage Tonic."

The girl sat up abruptly, then broke into ringing laughter.

"Billy Graeme! How can an artist be so disgustingly practical? I thought you were going to say something pretty to me."

"By George, I did muff that opportunity! But if I had thought of any Romeo poetry, I'd have hesitated before tryin' it on you, Trixie. Remember how you used to guy me when we were sweet fifteen an' I was in love with the lady bartender at the soda-fountain?"

"Yes. She weighs two hundred pounds and has four children."

"An' I'm goin' to marry the prettiest girl in America."

She nodded derisive thanks, drawing her hand away.

"Never mind, Billy — we do get along together beautifully. And I am awfully sorry you cannot have a coyote to order, dear. But you had better go in to papa. He wanted to show you those maps this evening, and it must be nine o'clock."

He rose reluctantly.

"What do I know about rubber-growin' in Mexico?" he complained. "But I suppose I've got to go flaunt my ignorance. Aren't you comin'? I don't like to leave you alone."

"Mama is asleep and you will be busy. I will stay here for a while, thank you."

The light from the car's interior flooded the platform with yellow radiance as Billy opened the door, then the moonlight reclaimed possession. Beatrice sank back in her chair and yielded herself to the spell of the desert she watched.

The train was running more slowly. From her reverie she awakened to that fact with a start, thrilled rather by curiosity than surprise. After a moment she stood up.

From the train this desert had seemed scarcely more real than the scenes of a theater, scarcely more possible to tread or touch. But now she realized that it was not so—that, if the train stopped, she might stand on that silver floor and plunge her fingers into the gray sand. And suddenly she ardently desired to do it.

There was a gate in the railing that surrounded the observation platform. She went there and laid her hand on it, waiting breathlessly, poised in expectation. If the train stopped she would call Billy. They could descend, if only for a moment.

The train did not stop. Its speed slackened still more, until Beatrice was on the point of calling; her lips were parted when the locomotive abruptly leaped forward with a jar that was communicated violently to the cars. Taken unaware, the girl was flung back, then forward against the gate.

The gate opened. Perhaps it had

been poorly fastened, perhaps her impatient fingers had loosened the latch. As it swung wide her hand slipped from the railing.

The train gathered speed, regaining its former pace. From the salon Mr. Arden's deep laugh sounded, as some drollery of Billy Graeme's distracted him from the business of the evening. Outside little shadows danced and flickered back and forth across the empty platform.

CHAPTER II.

The Man Who Dared.

WHITE and silver everywhere, billows of sand that stretched away like drifted snow, a silence, absolute and palpable under the exquisite, dazzling radiance of such moonlight as the North never knows.

Against that glittering blankness the man's figure loomed dark. He and his horse were equally immobile, arrested in utter amazement. The girl smiled contentedly, like a lovely child welcoming a caretaker, as she looked up to him and moved a step nearer. But she did not speak.

"*Señorita*—" he ventured at last, with the accent of one who doubts his own vision.

She put out her hands in a little gesture of appeal.

"You have come to take me where I should be?" she questioned. "For I should be somewhere, should I not? I cannot remember, but surely I should be somewhere. Have you come to take me there?"

Her clear voice shattered the unreality hedging her. The man dismounted and came toward her, baring his head.

"I will try," he promised, in English as perfect as her own, and with extreme gentleness. "Will you tell me how you come to be in this place?"

"I do not remember," she told him.

"Can you tell me your name?"

She paused, then shook her head.

"I cannot remember."

They considered each other gravely and attentively. Quite unconscious of herself, Beatrice studied with vague pleasure his uniform of green and gold, his dark young face that was strong rather than handsome, and the trained grace with which he bore himself. Even when wholly herself, she could not have feared or distrusted the steady, dark-gray eyes he fixed upon her.

There was nothing in her appearance to aid his conjecture or to explain the incredible presence of a girl of her obvious class alone in the desert, at night, and in a costume suited to a household evening.

Her pale-blue gown was scarcely disordered; even the jeweled pins in her ruddy hair were not displaced. It was not from physical injury that she was suffering, but from the shock of terror. The train had been moving slowly at the time of her fall.

"Do you remember where, in what direction, I should look for your friends?" he asked.

"No, no! I have walked a long way, a very long way," she sighed wearily, her soft lips quivering.

His gaze went to her little high-heeled slippers, of which the satin showed fresh and unmarred.

"Not very far, I think. Yet—" his glance quested across the empty distances in which they stood.

She moved nearer him, a shiver shaking her delicate frame.

"But you will take me where I should be? It is cold here."

He uttered an exclamation of self-reproach and wheeled to his horse, taking from the saddle a roll of bright-hued cloth.

"Please wear this," he urged. "May I show you how to put it on?"

She allowed him to fold her in the long, scarflike wrap of finest wool, and caught the fringe in her fingers.

"A serape," she identified triumphantly. "I bought one, once—to-night?"

"Where?" he seized the thread of recollection.

She hesitated, and shook her head, her brown eyes interrogating his, as he stood over her.

"I have forgotten. Does it matter much? Have I forgotten who you are, too?"

"I am an officer of the rurales. That does not mean much to you?" His bronzed face was swept by a smile. "The rurales are in Mexico what the Northwest mounted police are in Canada, except that we are soldiers and have a soldier's duties also. I am Lucian Carril."

"A soldier? And you will take care of me? You will not leave me here alone?"

He drew a swift breath, regarding her slim, brilliant figure as she stood before him in the naked desert; his serape wrapped about her New York gown, her beauty made ethereal by the silver light.

There was deep trouble in his expression, a profound anxiety amounting almost to anguish. It was as if behind her simple question he saw a meaning she could not divine, tragic in significance and not to be evaded. When he answered it was with something approaching resignation.

"I will accept the trust you give me," he said quietly. "There is only one thing to do, and only one way to do it. Will you ride with me to the nearest town?"

"Yes," she consented readily. "Oh, yes!"

"It will be a bare village, but there will be a station and a telegrapher and I can make inquiries. Your friends will be searching for you, surely. I think—"

"Yes?"

His steady eyes met hers.

"I think that if you can sleep on the way you will remember better. I am going to give you a little brandy. You have been badly frightened, perhaps by rebels in some attack. It is time of war in Mexico."

"I do not know—I will do all you bid. I am sorry I cannot tell you my name."

"Then I will call you Hermana," he volunteered. "That is what I call the only other girl for whom I would do this, my sister. Will you come this way?"

She drank from the cup he presently offered her. The superb black horse stooped its head to touch her shoulder in puzzled friendliness, and she passed her hand across the animal's soft forehead. Carril had busied himself in arranging a blanket on the saddle before him.

"If you will wrap the serape around you we will start," he advised.

She obeyed as he mounted. Stopping, he lifted her to the place before him with an effortless strength not promised by his slight proportions. She exclaimed faintly, surprised.

"You are not afraid, Hermana?" Carril asked.

"No," she denied. "Only I did not know that you were going to do that."

She had put out her left hand to grasp his arm, and the gleam of a diamond in the moonlight caught his attention.

"You are engaged to be married," he said slowly.

"Yes—to Billy."

The familiar name slipped readily from her tongue.

"Billy who?" he asked, carefully casual.

But the care was in vain; the gates of memory had swung shut at once.

"I do not remember," she regretted.

"Did you speak?"

"I said service is best without hope of reward—and dishonor less. Can you tell me whether Billy was with you to-night? Can you remember his face, or where you left him?"

She struggled to construct the desired picture, but shook her head hopelessly.

"Never mind; we will find him," he consoled.

He did not at once start, however, restraining his eager horse. There was a strange intensity in his survey of the empty vistas, a reluctant, somber determination in the movement with which he finally turned the animal's head toward the south.

Though the burden was double, the riders were light. The fine cavalry horse settled into a steady, swinging stride and held it, unfatigued.

Nestled in the curve of the man's arm, her head lying against his shoulder, Beatrice Arden rested with the absolute tranquillity of a child. Cut off by lack of memory from fear, conventionality, or even shyness, she lay in dazed contentment with the moment. But she did not sleep, as he had hinted.

After a time she turned her head so that she might watch his face, innocently and without concealment. Its dark distinction affected her with pleased admiration; line by line she studied it, while he gazed before him at their route, and the portrait sank into her memory, never to be effaced, however deeply buried and apparently lost.

When at last he glanced down and found her eyes fixed upon him, she smiled up at him serenely.

"Lucian," she repeated, "I remember your name. You will never leave me, will you?"

"There is a sword that cuts all promises, Hermana."

"What is that?"

"Death."

"Would that separate us?"

"Not if you loved me."

Her beautiful eyes dwelt on him for a moment.

"I do love you," she said seriously.

"You are confused in a maze of fancies, from which you will wake. You love Billy."

"I do not remember Billy."

"I do," said Carril, dryly.

The character of the country had changed in that two-hour ride. They were nearing the edge of the flat sands.

When Carril halted and set Beatrice on her feet, a small, clear spring bubbled from a mass of rock before them. He filled a cup of water for her before letting the eager horse drink.

"We will wait five minutes," he explained. "We must not tire our Alado."

She sighed with fatigue, surveying the horse. In the white light she looked like a creature fashioned of some pearly substance, her auburn hair burned copper-bronze above the vivid serape.

"Have we much farther to go?" she wondered.

"No. In a short time, we will be where I mean to take you."

"He does not look tired, your horse."

Again the dark shadow of anxiety crossed his face, and he allowed his eyes to glance back over the space they had traversed.

"He must cover many miles before morning, if I am to ride him again. Do not ask me why," as she would have spoken. "Hermana, I am taking you to the hut of an Indian woman, where you can rest in safety until your people come for you. When they come you will not tell them of me."

Bewildered, she stared at him.

"Not tell them of you?"

"No; never."

"But—why?"

Instead of replying he turned to summon the horse, which obeyed his call with the docility of a dog. When he had mounted, the girl came to him and he lifted her to the place before him.

She was too dazed to question further. Again she nestled into the curve of his arm and rested her head against his shoulder, and they rode on as before.

The moon-rays were level now, and the sudden tropic dawn not far away. Carril moved slightly in the saddle to meet the clear eyes of the girl in his arms.

"You never saw me," he stated

definitely. "You walked until you reached the hut of Manuela. You have been alone all night."

She lay quite still looking up at him, stupefied.

"You must say that. It is more important than you can understand now."

"Why?" she whispered.

"Do you love Billy?"

"I do not remember."

He turned his head away, compressing his lips.

"There are things of which I cannot speak to you. If you will not keep silence to protect yourself, will you do it for me?" he asked, with a touch of desperation. "Evil will happen to both of us if you say you passed this time with me."

"To—you?"

"Yes."

"I will do anything for you that I can."

"Then remember that you went alone to Manuela. You were alone all night."

"I went alone to Manuela," she repeated the lesson.

"You were alone all night."

"I—was—alone—all night."

Involuntarily, his clasp tightened.

"You will remember that, Hermana? I mean—if you remember me when you awake."

"I shall always remember you," amazed.

He looked at her, his gray eyes strangely intent.

"I will always remember you!" he exclaimed, with sudden passion.

"What are men for but to defend such as you? What are the lives of men ever worth when one of you intervenes?"

The landscape changed still more as they rode. Gradually it took on the aspect of cultivation. At last Carril drew rein before a hut.

A creeping drowsiness had overtaken the girl during the last half-hour. When Carril dismounted he was obliged to support her swaying

figure. Leaning against him, she watched dreamily while a tap of his riding-whip summoned the mistress and owner of the place.

It was an old, wrinkled Mexican woman who appeared, a woman with a dry, aquiline countenance and very bright, black eyes, which she fixed on Carril with fiery acuteness and inquiry.

"Not my bird, but one fallen from the nest of another," he answered the mute question. "Show her to a resting place, while I speak with you of what must be done."

If Beatrice had been asked if she understood Spanish she would have replied that she did not remember. But she comprehended Carril's speech without applying it to herself or seeking meaning in it. Exhaustion had claimed her and she could not stand alone.

The interior of the hut was clean and neat, a condition not usual in such dwellings. In one corner stood the unusual luxury of a bed, and on it Carril placed the drooping girl, throwing across her the serape that had served her as a cloak. Then he leaned to her in the semidarkness.

"You came alone to Manuela, and you have been alone all night," he said.

Her lips moved, but the drowsiness weighed too heavily for speech. Smiling, she regarded him through her falling lashes and, moving her hand, innocently touched his. With a stifled exclamation he bent toward her, almost fiercely, and kissed her once, then started away from her like a man who despises himself, and turned his back.

He joined the woman at the doorway presently, and they spoke long and earnestly. Of what the girl neither heard nor heeded, content to watch Carril's profile against the lighter background of the open space.

The kiss had not aroused her, rather the caress had lulled her to still deeper content. But, as her eyes finally closed, she heard the raised

voice of the woman she vaguely knew to be Manuela.

"*Sangre! Sangre!* Scarlet feathers have such birds!"

CHAPTER III.

The Awakening.

A PALLID, gray-lipped pair of men descended from the special train that drew into the little village, next morning. Mrs. Arden was prostrated by a night of hysterics and unable to leave her bed. An excited station-agent was awaiting the arrivals on the platform.

"Yes, yes, *señors!*" he anticipated their questions. "It is as we wired to you—the young lady is found, is here. Before dawn she reached the house of an Indian woman on the outskirts of the village, where she sleeps now."

"Safe?" burst from Billy Graeme.

"But, yes, *caballero!* The woman sent word by a soldier who was riding through town, and he stopped at the station to bid me telegraph in all directions of the event. That was not needed, since already your messages demanding news of the young lady filled every wire—as I told him."

"Where is the place?" asked Mr. Arden, his voice hoarsened by strain.

The agent obligingly led them to the one street of the tiny village and pointed the way.

Children, fat and brown, rolled from the doorways to stare at the strangers. Their elders frankly imitated them, good-natured and sympathetic. But the two who sought Beatrice noticed nothing. Only once Billy broke the silence.

"It must have been just before we found she was missin' that she fell off, then. She couldn't have walked far."

Mr. Arden made an inarticulate sound in his throat. His handsome, middle-aged face was haggard and weary; no one on the train had expected to find the young girl alive.

Manuela was standing in her door-

way. At the approach of the Americans, she stepped back and admitted them to the shaded interior.

Beatrice was still asleep. The two men stopped short at sight of her tranquil, reposing figure, as she lay with softly flushed face, her breath drawn with gentle regularity. Her bright hair still rippled in smooth waves and coils; a flower her *fiancé* had given her the night before still clung to the bosom of her dress. In appearance she seemed as though asleep in her own home.

Billy took off his hat. But Mr. Arden cried out sharply:

"Beatrice! Beatrice!"

Her eyes opened at once, bewildered.

"Papa!" she exclaimed.

He sprang across and caught her in his arms, speechless. For many moments the hut was silent.

"We found the gate unlatched," Mr. Arden said, at last. "We knew then what had become of you."

"Yes, I leaned on it," she corroborated, shuddering. "I thought the train was going to stop. Billy—" she paused and held out her hand to the younger man.

He squeezed it, dumb.

"We believed the fall must have killed you," said her father unsteadily.

"I was not hurt. But I was frightened, horribly frightened. When I stood up the train was gone. I tried to follow it—I ran—" The color left her cheeks as she evoked the memory of that panic. "I thought of all the things I had ever read—of tarantulas and dreadful poisonous creatures. There was no one to help me; I was all alone. I think I ran and ran—until I fell down again, on the sand."

The two men exchanged an appalled glance.

"And you reached here, thank God," Mr. Arden completed the story.

"If you had been lost in the desert—" He passed his handkerchief across his forehead.

Beatrice hesitated, her eyes puzzled, and looked around the room.

"Here?" she doubted. "I thought you brought me here. I only remember that I ran and ran. There was no house, only sand and dark plants."

The Indian woman, who had been watching the scene from the doorway, interposed sullenly, as if divining what was being said in the alien language:

"I found her outside. She was as one in a fever, knowing nothing. I brought her in here."

Beatrice looked at her earnestly, struggling with a confused sense of doubt and loss.

"I cannot remember," she said, in her uncertain Spanish.

The woman nodded, offering no comment.

"I stopped a soldier, who was passing on the road," she informed Mr. Arden. "He said that messages should be sent. I know nothing of such matters."

Mr. Arden rose and went to her. The handful of gold money that he offered would have purchased the property of half the village.

"We are very grateful," he began.

The Indian drew back abruptly, pushing away his hand. Her opaque black eyes glittered, not with malevolence or hatred, but with the patient melancholy inborn in her race.

"*Sangre!*" she ejaculated.

Astounded, Mr. Arden looked from her to the rejected gold.

"'Blood'!" he echoed, distrusting his hearing. "What do you mean? You have done us a great service."

She pushed away his hand as decidedly as before, and turned aside.

"No," she refused definitely.

Vexed and offended, he returned the gold to his pocket and faced his daughter.

"If you are strong enough we had better take you to your mother," he advised.

"Oh, yes!" she assented eagerly, rising and laying her hand on the arm Billy sprang forward to offer.

On the way out she paused opposite the old woman.

"You will let me thank you, at least," she urged with hesitating grace. "You have done so much for me, so much more than I can remember, even."

For sole response the Indian lifted from the bed that serape in which Lucian Carril had wrapped his charge.

"What is yours, take with you," she bade, and put it in Beatrice's hands.

The beautiful fabric, fine as silk, warm as wool, slipped through the girl's white fingers. Strangely stirred, she gazed at it.

"You give it to me?" she questioned.

"What was never mine cannot be given by me," was the answer. "*Vaya con Diós, señora.*"

There being nothing else to do, Beatrice went. And she took the serape with her.

The special train that had been sent back over the route in search of the missing girl was puffing impatience to be gone. As Beatrice hurried into the private car and sped to her mother the beaming station-agent came up to the two gentlemen.

"If you were going in the other direction you might be stopped by the rebels on the way through," he observed pleasantly. "Oh, it would be nothing alarming; our revolutionists are good comrades! They would only look through the cars to be sure you were carrying no soldiers or arms to be used against them."

"I didn't suppose there were any rebels around here!" exclaimed Billy, interested. "By George, I'm spoilin' to see a real battle!"

The other laughed and shrugged.

"Too late, *señor*. The rebels won a victory in the hour before dawn this morning, thirty miles from here. They captured an ammunition-train on the way down. A surprise attack it was. They either got past our outpost guard or killed him, for he gave no warning."

"It happened north of us?"

"Yes, *señor*; on the desert."

"We are going to Mexico City," declared Mr. Arden. "Come, Bilford."

But Billy loitered.

"I wish I could have seen them fightin'," he regretted. "Just think what a lively full-page ad for that Flemish Cleanser Company I could make! An attack on a train carryin' cans of the stuff, you know, an' the title:

FLEMISH CLEANSER IS THE DEAREST TREASURE OF THE HOME.

I wonder if I'd see anythin' if I went back?"

"You will not go," stated his prospective father-in-law decidedly. "I did not know there could be a practical artist until I saw your methods. When your father told me you were determined to study art I was disgusted, because I wanted a practical man for Beatrice, and we had arranged your marriage while you were both children in skirts. But now I see there is such a thing as being too practical. Get aboard, Billy; you will have to find an advertisement that is not on the line of battle."

"I'm goin' on twenty-six," rebelled Billy.

But he entered the train, nevertheless, and he meditated upon Mr. Arden's speech all the rest of the journey. So it had been arranged by their parents that he and Beatrice were to marry. He had never heard that before, nor, he was sure, had Trix.

Of course, it was all right; he did not know any girl in the world who would have suited him as well or whom he so much admired and loved; they were going to be an ideal couple. Still, no man likes to be guided into marriage, and now he began to realize that was precisely what had happened. Left to themselves, would they ever have thought of each other just in that way? Probably; still, he wished it had happened so. Billy Graeme was pink-skinned and a trifle plump, but there was nothing effeminate or weak

in his good-humored face; his chin could set, and did, in spite of its undeniable dimple.

The first day after the party was established in Mexico City, at one of the huge hotels, Billy sought his *fiancée* alone.

"Trix," he said, "will you marry me when we get back home, after this trip, instead of next October, as we had planned?"

Amazed, she turned in her chair to look at him.

"Why, Billy! What a funny idea? Why?"

"I want you to come abroad with me; I want to live where we are runnin' ourselves, an' not bein' nursed like children. You know I'm able to take care of my wife. Anyhow, there wouldn't be any starvin' even if our parents cut us off with a shillin'; an' I'm tired of apron-strings. I've never wanted anythin' so much in my life. Won't you come, Trix?"

Her color a little heightened, Beatrice patted his hand, as in his eagerness he grasped the arm of her chair, leaning toward her. Her lovely red-brown eyes met his in affectionate indulgence.

"Why, of course, Billy, if you want me to. What difference does it make if we are married in June or October? I think it would be lovely to spend the summer in France."

"Thank you," he said.

And as an afterthought he rose and kissed her fresh, unimpassioned mouth. He still held her hand when he sat down again.

"I'll be straight an' decent, Trix," he added. "I'll try never to make you regret takin' me."

To see him sober had all the effect of romance. The girl gave him a candid, sunny smile, and there was a pause of considerable length. A little later, when he rose to go, she held up the vivid-hued serape that lay across her lap.

"Billy, did I buy that at Monterey?" she asked.

"Not with me," he reported, after inspecting it. "We didn't buy anything so luxurious."

"I cannot remember where I got it," she avowed, almost feverishly. "What is the matter with me? Why can I not remember that? And I want to know—I want to know!"

He regarded her in puzzled surprise. He had known her as the incarnation of healthy placidity; now he glimpsed some strange unrest stirring and flaring within her, like restless flame behind a translucent screen.

"Why did the Indian woman who gave me it hate me?" she pursued, when he remained mute.

"Trix!"

"She hated me. And she said '*sangre*,' refusing our money. *Sangre* means blood."

"Your nerves are out," he evaded uneasily. "She was probably thinkin' about the battle they had up the line that night; perhaps some of her relatives were in it."

"With the soldiers?"

"With the rebels. The soldiers were a troop of rurales—Mexico's West Pointers, you know."

Mr. and Mrs. Arden offered no objection to the hastened wedding plans; in fact, they were well pleased with the ardor displayed by Billy. The matter was arranged in a family council that evening, and at its conclusion Billy invited the two ladies to an early morning visit to the flower market.

"I'm goin' to buy a carriageful of those yellow melons," he explained. "An' everybody is supposed to see the flower market."

So in the cool of early morning next day Beatrice and her mother took their places in the carriage—an up-to-date mother and daughter, both of them beauties and alike in costume from their small white shoes to their large white hats. "Stunnin'," Billy said.

And while they were laughing over the compliment the carriage swung around a corner of the gay, fragrant flower market—and into a riot.

In the center of a clear space, strewn with scattered blossoms dropped by their terrified owners, stood a half-naked, wholly drunken negro, pulque-lashed to madness. From every side the gentle Indian venders had fled or crouched behind such shelter as could be found, leaving the conqueror in lordship of the field. As the driver of the carriage reined his horses to a standstill the negro turned that way and stared at the arrivals, sinking his head between his shoulders in sinister concentration.

He held a pistol in his hand. Mrs. Arden screamed and fell back, covering her face. Beatrice half rose.

"By George, he's equal to shootin' it!" Billy cried, springing up to place himself before the women. "Get down in the bottom, quick."

Neither of his charges obeyed. And while the four people gazed at each other, dumb, a diversion occurred. A man stepped from one of the narrow, flower-crowded lanes, and toward him the insane man whirled as if realizing that here was an enemy not passive. The pistol in the black hand was raised and brought to bear on the newcomer, the thick lips drew apart in a vicious snarl.

The new arrival paused unhurriedly, his gray eyes appraising the menacing figure with slow contempt. He wore a superb cavalry uniform of green and gold, but he was unarmed and carried only a riding-whip. Fascinated, the cowering crowd and the three Americans watched the riot resolve itself into a duel.

The negro was ready to shoot. There could be no doubt of his intention, and the distance between him and the officer presented an insurmountable point in his favor, since before it was crossed the unarmed man must fall. Billy Graeme noiselessly unfastened the carriage door and picked something up from the seat, waiting.

Into the tense hush the officer's incisive voice cut with the effect of a steel blade.

"Come here!" he ordered.

A gasping sigh of sheer marvel at the audacity ran through the witnesses. The negro's dull face worked, altering from ferocity to stupid wonder.

"You heard me?" the officer demanded, tapping the flexible lash of the whip against his boot. "Come here!"

The gray eyes and the sullen dark ones met in a long, unflinching encounter of wills. The negro's wavered first. Slowly and warily, keeping the pistol leveled, he lurched forward until less than two yards separated him from the other. His finger gripped on the trigger, his powerful body crouched in readiness, he bided his moment to fire, held by something approaching curiosity.

"The next time I call, come more quickly," advised the officer curtly, and stepping forward with swift abruptness he struck the lash across the negro's evil face.

Beatrice Arden screamed, the cry blended with the negro's maddened snarl. As his ready finger pressed the trigger the whip-lash hissed again, curling around his wrist. The report and the clatter of the falling weapon sounded almost together. As he rushed the whip fell a third time, the heavily weighted handle crashing upon his temple.

Reeling, he was crouching for a final spring upon his slighter antagonist, when a brown zapote melon hurtled from the Americans' carriage and struck him on the side of the head. The fruit split, scattering juice and orange-colored pulp, but the unique missile served its purpose, and the negro's huge bulk went to the ground.

Instantly a score of the brown vendors flung themselves upon him, and the battle was over.

"Some pitchin'!" exulted the triumphant Billy. "I've got another if he needs it, old man. I've liked those melons from the first day."

Beatrice, her lips parted, her face changing like rippled water, was gazing

at the young officer as he crossed to the carriage.

"Billy," she panted—"Billy, who is he? Tell me—I cannot remember!"

The introduction answered her, as her *fiancé* leaned out to grasp the officer's hand.

"Mrs. Arden, Trix, let me present Lieutenant Carril, of the rurales, whom I had the pleasure of meetin' last night at the American Club. An' I'm proud to say he's half an American, too."

CHAPTER IV.

The Man Pays.

THE Ardens saw a great deal of Lieutenant Carril in the next week. Mr. and Mrs. Arden liked him from the moment of introduction; Billy adopted him as a brother. The emotions of Beatrice were less easy to define.

After their return from the flower market, the first morning, she had sought information from her *fiancé*.

"Carril is the best-liked officer in his corps," Bill had elucidated. "He's got a record of daredevil, hair-raisin' feats that reads like a dime novel. His mother was an American, a Californian, an' he was educated in the United States. Owns silver mines an' haciendas, an' all that sort of thing. He's just in from active service against the rebels, an' next week he'll join his regiment in Guerrero, where it's been rushed south."

The girl pressed her hand against her heart.

"Billy, I know him."

"You do? Where did you meet him—home?"

"I do not know. It is like the se-rape—I cannot remember. But when he looks at me—"

"Yes?"

"I do not know!" she cried hysterically. "Billy, Billy, I do not know."

More self-controlled than Beatrice, Carril never gave aid to her strug-

gling memory. Never, by word or glance, did he betray a previous meeting with the girl he had held a night long in his arms. But he could not hide another thing—an emotion women are quick to recognize.

One morning, when he and Beatrice chanced to be alone for a moment in the patio of the hotel, she spoke abruptly.

"Where have I known you?" she challenged, turning upon him.

"In the flower-market, Miss Arden, I had the honor—"

"No! Before then, somewhere before then!"

He shook his dark head with a gesture of excuse.

"Pardon me, Miss Arden, it is impossible that I could ever forget after seeing you."

She looked at him fixedly, her bosom rising and falling rapidly under linen and lace.

"Why do you come here, then, Lieutenant Carril? The city is full of your friends—why do you give your time to us, mere acquaintances of a week?"

His gray eyes lighted dangerously, meeting hers.

"If you wish to know, Miss Arden, I will tell you. I am at liberty to indulge myself in the few days left me, since next week I am going where I may be lucky enough to meet the rebel bullet that should find me."

"Should! Why?" startled into pallor.

"A debt of honor," he answered, and moved to join the entering group.

It had been arranged that the party should drive to Chapultepec Park on that morning. Laughing and jesting, they were taking their seats in the carriage when a soldier galloped up to the curb, dismounted, and came to a salute, his eyes on Carril.

"Well, Perez?" the officer demanded.

The man saluted again.

"I have to report that Private Diego Torres, supposed to have been killed at his post on the night of the

recent attack by rebels, was yesterday discovered and arrested as a deserter in the house of a woman in Guerrero."

Carril's hand fell from the carriage door.

"Arrested? Alive?"

"Yes, sir. He has been tried by court-martial and sentenced to be shot."

"You will go to the telegraph—"

The man saluted.

"Pardon, Señor Teniente; the rebels have cut the wires."

"Your horse is fresh?"

"Yes, sir."

"I will take it; you may so report."

The Americans were listening, excited and curious. To them Carril turned, his dark face set and colorless.

"I am riding to save life," he apologized composedly. "It is not probable, hardly possible, that I shall return; pray forgive my abrupt leaving. I hope you will have a pleasant drive."

Beatrice exclaimed faintly, but no one noticed her. Carril bowed over the fingers of the two ladies and shook hands with Mr. Arden.

"Not me." Billy refused the farewell. "I'm comin' along, if you'll have me."

"Coming?" Carril repeated, pausing in the act of taking the bridle from the soldier.

"With you. I'm sick of sight-seein'—I want to see somethin' real. It's only an excursion; I can be back in a couple of days."

"This is not a pleasure trip, Graeme."

"I know it isn't. You're ridin' to save that deserter's neck, an' I want to see you do it—what? I'll get a horse an' follow. If I'm in your way any time, go on an' leave me."

One foot in the stirrup, Carril looked at him, looked him over in a keen glance of examination.

"The man is innocent," he stated.

"But if what you want is to see a man shot, come—that is, if you can stand the pace. I am going out the road I showed you yesterday."

"I'm on!" cried Billy, choking with delight. "I'll catch up, if you'll go a bit slow on the first mile."

It is probable that Mr. Arden would have objected if there had been an opportunity. But Billy's farewell was in the nature of a whirlwind, and before the situation was fairly realized he was running down the side street in the direction of the hotel stables, heedless of the effect upon passers-by of the spectacle of a rather plump, pink-faced, young American racing through the tropical sunshine pouring down in a white flood.

The horse was readily supplied to his demand. Outside the stable a chauffeur dozed on the seat of a taxicab. To him Billy dashed, clutching at the man's leggings with one hand, while, with the other, he drew a quantity of silver from a pocket.

"Take 'em off!" he adjured breathlessly. "Here, take this—all of it—only take 'em off!"

Open-mouthed, the chauffeur gaped, mechanically reaching for the money.

"Take it," the blond maniac approved, thrusting the coin into his hand and commencing to unbuckle the leggings. "I've got to have them—to ride in, you know. Other foot!"

One legging had come off with a ripping sound. The confounded chauffeur, in a state of complete incredulity as to the possibility of such things being, suffered the gentleman to tear off the other.

Seating himself on the curb, Billy deliberately fitted the coverings to his own limbs, indifferent to the gathering circle. When the task was accomplished and his costume transformed into one passable for riding, a grinning boy led out the saddled horse. On the plaza Billy halted long enough to buy a many-colored blanket from one Indian vender and a wide hat from another, then galloped recklessly through the streets and out the road Carril had indicated.

Carril was riding at the steady pace of one who intends to use his horse

hour after hour. Billy did not overtake him within the first mile, but he overtook him within the first hour.

Carril did not speak after briefly greeting his companion. And for a time Billy was content to ride quietly, regaining his mental balance and equanimity. When he recovered his desire to chat he made a discovery that kept him silent a while longer—there was a change in his friend that somewhat awed him.

There was an absolute quietness about Carril that Billy gradually recognized was not of repose, but of something nearer desperation. Why? What was the life or death of the deserting soldier to Lucian Carril to blanch him to this pale-bronze immobility?

Moreover, they were going to save the man. Why did the excitement of action, the stir of the race against death, the swing and stride of their horses through the dazzling sun and air of Mexico, leave the famous young officer stone-cold, stone-mute?

When lengthening shadows signaled the arrival of afternoon Billy broke the silence.

"Carril, when do we eat?" he inquired cheerfully.

"We do not," said Carril.

Billy opened his mouth and shut it again.

"Well, I had a good breakfast," he resigned himself. "But the horses aren't goin' to stand this forever; they've been doin' miles an' miles without restin'."

"We will find fresh ones at a cavalry-post ahead."

"Look here, why couldn't we have saved trouble by comin' part way by train?"

"Because the rebels control the railroad at Cuernavaca."

The novice subsided. A few miles farther on Carril turned to look at his companion, reining in his horse.

"Graeme, we are going into a dangerous district," he said quietly. "My uniform will make me a target for any lurking rebel. If I fall and you escape,

you must keep on to the camp of Colonel Zuñiga and do my errand. It will be safer for you in any case than turning back alone. Let the animals drink at this brook while I show you the map."

They were within the edge of a forest now. Down a rough hillside leaped and chimed a silver-toned, silver-clear brook. As the eager horses plunged their noses into the water a brilliant bird whirled past the American's head, and he saw the back of a mottled snake slipping away through the underbrush. They were riding deeper and deeper into the south, and descending from the cool, safe altitude into the genuine tropics.

"Here is the route," Carril indicated, drawing a pencil along the map. "We are at this point here. Before dawn we should ride into the camp. If I am not with you, stop when the first sentry challenges you and ask to be taken to Colonel Zuñiga."

"An' what am I goin' to tell the colonel?"

Carril lifted his steady gray eyes to the other man's:

"Tell him that Lucian Carril said that the story of the man, Torres, is true; that the man is not a deserter, but obeyed the orders given him. And tell him why I do not bring the message myself."

Billy put the map into his pocket, sorely disconcerted by this turn of affairs.

"All right—if I ever get there. But see here, Carril, you aren't expectin' to be killed?"

"No such luck," returned Carril bitterly, and sent his horse forward.

Billy spurred after him, speechless.

The road grew wilder and wilder. They were avoiding villages and traveled highways, plunging recklessly and at the highest speed practicable into the most direct and dangerous route. Billy Graeme considered himself an experienced rider for a city man, but already he ached with fatigue.

Just at sunset, when they paused at

the top of a long climb to let the horses breathe, Carril, with the suspicion of a smile, tossed a little packet to his comrade.

"There is your dinner, Graeme."

"What?"

"Chocolate."

Billy accepted it ruefully, half laughing as he looked around them.

"Thanks awfully. I'd rather have a broiled parrot or a dozen bananas. An'—by George!"

He was out of his saddle in an instant and scrambling up the bank.

"Melons!" he shouted gleefully.

"My favorite kind, an' a tree of 'em!"

Carril turned to watch him, scanning the papaya-tree that was the object of pursuit; then suddenly stiffened in his saddle.

"Graeme, stop!" he ordered peremptorily. "Stop!"

Billy hastened his climbing, his eyes on the cool, luscious fruit.

"It won't take a minute," he called back. "Don't be a grouch, old man."

Something whirled through the air with a snakelike hiss. The American's shoulders were gripped hard; he was jerked backward fully ten feet and, slipping, rolled down into the road.

"Carril!" he called chokingly. "Carril!"

The thin coils of rope around him glided off as he stood up. Carril was calmly recoiling the lasso, without either mirth or apology.

"Carril?" Billy sputtered, wrathfully comprehending what had happened.

"When you are out here obey orders," Carril advised laconically.

"But what do you mean by treatin' me like that? I'm not takin' orders."

Carril finished the last coil, hung the lasso in its place on the saddle, and as the American came up to him laid a hand on his shoulder, and faced him toward the papaya-tree. Up its trunk a small, yellowish insect was crawling, at the very spot Billy had intended to grasp.

"Death in a couple of hours," he ob-

served. "Out here, Graeme, obey orders first, and quarrel with them afterward. Mount, please; we are wasting time."

Billy mounted. And he ate his square of milk-chocolate without fruit.

As darkness fell with tropic abruptness they rode into the small camp Carril had mentioned. Fresh horses were readily supplied to them, and they pushed in at renewed speed.

Hour after hour they forced their way through black, narrow trails, stumbling through watercourses and up and down ravines; brushed by branches and low-swinging vines at whose cool touch Billy would nearly fling himself off his horse in horrified recollection of scorpions and snakes.

"What's the matter with our stoppin' to get some breath?" Billy proposed once, shrinking from the slap of a wet leaf.

"You can. But I should not advise it."

The mere suggestion of being here alone was enough; the subject was hastily abandoned.

Out of the darkness a challenge rang with startling effect. Afar through the trees gleamed the red of a camp-fire.

"*Amigo!*" Carril responded. "This is Lieutenant Carril reporting to Colonel Zuñiga. Call the officer of the guard."

There was a brief delay and some colloquy Billy was too weary to heed, then the sound of weapons brought to a salute. The two travelers rode forward.

The open space was dotted by dying camp-fires and tents, and the dark shapes of men wrapped in blankets and asleep. The visitors dismounted before an Indian hut, evidently pressed into service as a headquarters. A sentry made way for them, saluting.

The lighted room into which they stepped almost dazzled Billy after the long obscurity. But he stopped near the door and watched Carril go forward, realizing himself to be merely a spectator.

Five men in the regimental green and gold were seated on three sides of a rude table. The table was littered with maps and papers, but the attention of the men was not on them. They had the air of what they were—a counsel interrupted to become a court.

Opposite them, between two soldiers, drooped the man whose case was ended. He was making no resistance or protest, a study in passive hopelessness. But as his guards drew him back to make way for the arriving officer he saw Carril's face.

"Señor Teniente!" he cried, his voice rising to a shriek. All the stoical submission of his bearing gave place to wild excitement as he flung himself forward, dragging his arms from his captors and extending his bound hands to Carril. "*Señor*, save me! Tell them that I knew nothing—that I obeyed orders. I am to be shot!"

Carril stepped past him, saluting the men at the table, who punctiliously returned the courtesy.

"Lieutenant Carril, do you know anything of this matter?" questioned the presiding officer, whom Billy guessed to be Colonel Zuñiga.

"His story is true, sir," Carril stated, with the singular quietness that had puzzled Billy Graeme all day. "He is not at fault in this affair."

There was a stir around the table.

"Not at fault?" exclaimed Zuñiga hotly. "Recollect yourself, sir. This is the man whose failure to fulfil his duty and give warning of the approach of the rebel forces caused the loss of a train of ammunition and supplies in the northern campaign. He was supposed to have been honorably killed at his post, until day before yesterday he was accidentally found lurking in the house of a woman near here. This traitor and deserter you declare is not at fault?"

"He was not on duty at the time of the rebels' attack," was the steady reply. "He had been relieved of his sentry duty by a superior officer, whom he was obliged to obey."

"How do you know this, Lieutenant Carril? Who was this officer?"

There was an instant's pause. The prisoner strained forward, his feverish gaze fixed on his defender. The distant wail of some forest creature drifted across the hush.

"It was I," answered Lucian Carril.

CHAPTER V.

The Sentence.

THIS was what Carril had been riding toward all day. It is not pleasant to hear a man pronounce his own sentence, and Billy Graeme felt that he had heard Carril do that precisely. Not from the statement, which might have been explained as innocent, but from his recollection of Carril's bearing since the moment he had learned of the arrest of the deserter, Torres.

There was a bench against the wall; Billy sat down on it weakly. It seemed to him a long time before Colonel Zuñiga spoke.

"Torres, is this your story?" he demanded, his speech cold and carefully level.

The prisoner made a convulsive and mechanical attempt to salute with his manacled hands.

"Yes, Señor Coronel," he articulated hoarsely.

"Why did you not speak more plainly in your own defense?"

"Señor, I thought no one would believe my word against the Señor Teniente: I feared to make my case worse."

"Remove him under guard," Zuñiga ordered. "Martinez, have the room cleared and close the door."

The orders were promptly obeyed. The hut was left empty except for the seated officers at the table, the slim, young orderly Martinez, Billy in his unnoticed seat, and Carril himself.

"Lieutenant Carril, this is none the less a court martial because it was convened to try another man," Zuñiga said slowly. "You have accused yourself before it, and I have no choice but to

proceed in this investigation. You will please answer the questions put to you."

Without reply, Carril unbuckled his sword and laid it on the table, then stood back, waiting.

This was no hostile court, the American well knew, but a court of Carril's fellow-officers and comrades, who looked at the man before them with faces tense as his own.

"Why did you send the sentinel from the outpost he should have guarded?" asked Zuñiga.

"I meant to take his place," Carril answered. "I thought I could do the work more intelligently. The post was that of a scout, rather than a sentinel, from its great distance from the actual camp. I had no other duties that night, and I wanted the adventure."

"You took his place on guard?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why did you not ride back to give warning of the enemy's approach as he should have done?"

"I did not know of it in time."

"Why not? They must have passed near the post you had assumed."

Carril hesitated, and was silent. Billy Graeme leaned forward; it seemed to him that no years could ever blot out this picture of the straight, lithe figure of his friend standing alone before those grimly reluctant judges.

"Why, did you not see them, Lieutenant Carril?"

"I was not there," Carril admitted.

"You left the post you had taken in charge?"

"For a time I did."

"Why?"

"I cannot answer, sir."

Zuñiga fell back in his chair, gathering together the heap of papers before him with a pretense of composure that deceived no one. One of the other soldier-judges spoke:

"When did you take the guard upon yourself, lieutenant?"

"At ten o'clock in the evening, sir."

"And when did you leave it?"

"At a little after ten, sir."

"And you returned to it, when?"

For the first time Carril changed color. A red flush swept to his forehead as he made unwilling reply:

"After sunrise, sir."

"You were away all night!" escaped the gray-haired officer in an involuntary cry of amazement.

"Yes," Carril acknowledged with a difficult breath.

There was a pause. The officers exchanged glances of grave and regretful significance. After a moment, Colonel Zuñiga drew himself together:

"What did you do upon your return to your post?"

"I heard the sound of firing and knew the rebels had passed," Carril responded. "I rode to join our forces, where, as you know, sir, I arrived in time to take part in the final engagement."

"Yes, you carried yourself bravely, as always," Zuñiga said heavily, and was silent.

"If your purpose in taking Torres's place was open and creditable to you both, why did he run away to hiding?" demanded an officer who had not yet spoken, a short, stout man with a lisping voice.

"I do not know, sir," Carril answered. "I ordered him to return to camp and report my action to his commanding officer."

"Then how did you expect to conceal your failure to guard your post?"

Carril's dark brows contracted.

"I did not expect to conceal it, sir," he corrected haughtily. "When I sent Torres away I intended to guard the post until relieved, as he should have done. Afterward, when I rejoined my regiment, I expected to be summoned for an examination of my conduct. But that did not happen, and then I found Diego Torres was supposed to be dead. I had no reason to think otherwise, so the matter rested."

"You did not report your failure in duty?"

"I am not given to self-martyrdom," said Carril dryly. "I did not."

"Yet you have done so now."

"Yes; because an innocent man was about to be punished in my place."

"So, when you assumed the guard, you did not plan to desert it?"

This time Carril moved:

"Captain, I am on trial for neglect of duty. You are accusing me of treason," his retort flashed. "No, I did not."

There was no sympathetic movement such as made the American catch his breath; no response to the indignation. Colonel Zuñiga picked up a pen, tapping on the table with it as he spoke:

"Lieutenant Carril, the rebels attacked us that night with an exact knowledge of our position and the arrangement of our forces that has caused us considerable anxiety ever since. They had communicated with some one in our corps, or they had very clever spies. By your own account you were away all that night. Why did you leave the post you had assumed charge of, and where were you from ten o'clock until sunrise?"

"I cannot answer, sir."

"You will answer or be shot," stated Zuñiga. "For if you refuse to say where you spent that night, we must believe you spent it with our enemies."

"No!" Carril cried fiercely.

Zuñiga leaned across the table, meeting him eye to eye:

"You must say where you were, or leave us to that conclusion."

White with passion, Carril took a step forward:

"I am not guilty, Colonel Zuñiga."

"Will you tell us where you spent that night?"

"I cannot. It was spent honorably."

"Where?"

"I cannot answer."

"You will not?"

"I cannot."

"Why?"

"I cannot answer."

"You understand what this means to you?"

Carril straightened himself, his eyes fell to the glittering sword he should never buckle on again, and there rested:

"Yes," he said quietly.

Colonel Zuñiga again sank back in his chair, glancing around the table. Billy Graeme gripped the edge of his bench. He thought he knew what was coming, and he did not want to hear it. He felt rather sick; he would have liked to go outside, but it did not seem decent to move.

He knew something of martial law in Mexico; its suddenness and lack of ceremony; its deadly finality. Moreover, this was a regimental disgrace, to be hurried out of sight.

The judges exchanged some brief, unheard communication. Zuñiga listened, then slowly lifted his eyes to the self-convicted officer. He was paler than Carril, with the withered pallor of age; suddenly it had become apparent that he was quite an old man.

"Lieutenant Carril, you have been found guilty of neglect of duty and desertion of your post in time of war," he pronounced. "It is the sentence of the court that you be shot at dawn tomorrow. You will consider yourself under arrest from this moment."

Carril saluted without a word. Colonel Zuñiga spoke to the white-faced young orderly, who went to summon the guard.

They reentered, bringing the prisoner Diego Torres, forgotten in the greater interest.

"Private Torres, did Lieutenant Carril order you to return to your company and report him as taking your place?" Zuñiga demanded.

"Yes, *señor*," he answered.

"Why did you not obey?"

The man wet his dry lips:

"Señor Coronel, I have a wife near there not three weeks married. I went to see her that night. I thought that I could report early next morning and no one would ever know. But, when I heard of the battle, I was afraid I would be punished for being absent—I was afraid to go back."

"You are little better than a deserter, Diego Torres," Zuñiga stated coldly. "But you have a good record,

and Mexico needs her soldiers. You may return to your duties."

The orderly gave a direction, and the staggering Torres was thrust outside. The guard moved toward Carril, who stepped back to meet them.

"Will you give me your parole, lieutenant?" asked the orderly, almost imploringly. He and Carril were friends; had shared plate and blanket on many a campaign.

"Yes, Martinez," Carril consented as quietly. "Will you let me have a word with my friend here?"

Billy had stood up at their approach. Martinez signed to him to follow as they left the room.

Under the brilliant night sky, by the light of a dying fire, Billy gripped his friend's hand:

"Carril," he choked, "Carril, can't I do somethin', anythin'?"

The orderly drew back a few paces, motioning the guard to do likewise, and considerably turned his back.

"Nothing," Carril answered. "You had better go home, Graeme, to—to Miss Arden. Don't wait to see the last of me; a firing party at dawn makes a poor magazine cover. Martinez will get you a guard you can trust."

Billy cast a desperate glance around the dark forest:

"Carril, bolt!" he besought.

"I have given my parole. Good-by—good luck!"

"Carril, can't you tell them what they want? I—confound it, I'll swear you were with me!"

"No use, Graeme. Yes, there is one thing you can do; don't tell your people about this. Good by."

"Carril—"

Carril stepped back to Martinez.

"Don't gather zapote melons without looking at the tree," he counseled lightly.

Billy stood perfectly still, staring after him. In some twenty-six hours he would be dead, and he was talking about zapote melons. The American shuddered, sick.

Half an hour later the orderly came

to the place where he was sitting on a stump.

"You want to leave, *señor*," he commenced.

"No!" Billy snapped. "I'm goin' to see it through."

Martinez looked his surprise.

"Oh! Lieutenant Carril asked me to find you a guide."

"All right," Billy hurtled, shamelessly contradictory. "Yes, let me get out of this butcherin' place. The sooner the better!"

CHAPTER VI.

The Girl Who Remembered.

IT was a fretful, listless gentleman, pink only through sunburn, who walked into the dining-room where the Ardens were at luncheon next day. A bath and a suit of white flannels had removed the signs of the trail, but the evidence of frayed nerves was not so easily obliterated.

"I did not expect to see you for a week," observed Mr. Arden from behind his week-old New York paper.

"Did you get the magazine cover?" Beatrice inquired merrily, leaning back in her chair and tilting her dimpled white chin as she surveyed him.

"No!" Billy almost shouted, stopping short and clutching at the back of a chair.

Mrs. Arden dropped her glasses into her plate.

"Really, Bilford," she rebuked.

"I beg your pardon," her prospective son-in-law gloomily apologized. "I—I'm feelin' rotten."

"You look it," his *fiancée* sympathized. "Come sit beside me and I will see that you are fed properly. Did you have to eat army rations yesterday? What did you have for dinner with Lieutenant Carril?" A fugitive color crossed her cheek as she spoke the name.

"Nothin'," said Billy, dropping into the chair.

The family stared at him, dumb.

"But you must have starved! What did you have for breakfast?"

"I forget. Nothin' much."

Beatrice first recovered breath.

"At least you shall be fed now," she soothed. "Here, commence with this zapote melon; you adore them."

Billy thrust back his chair, gazing wildly at the slice of orange-colored fruit.

"Zapotes!" he groaned. "Oh, confound it! What a rotten mess!" and fairly dropped his head in his hands. "'Don't pick zapotes'—an' they're goin' to shoot him at dawn."

"Billy?" cried the girl.

"Bilford!" exclaimed Mr. and Mrs. Arden simultaneously. "Who? Shoot whom?"

Billy gripped his yellow hair in his fingers.

"He told me not to tell you—Carril. He's been tried by court martial an' sentenced to be shot, because he won't tell where he was. An' I lookin' on!"

"Billy," said Mr. Arden as patiently as possible. "If you have not got a fever and know what you are saying, will you explain what you mean? Carril is captured by the rebels?"

"No, he's not. He's been court-martialed for leavin' the place where he was on guard the night that Beatrice was lost, when there was a battle. He was the sentry that the rebels got past. He left his post out on the desert all night, an' he won't tell where he was, so they think he was with the rebels an' not playin' square."

Beatrice rose, swaying, her beautiful eyes wide. The room was turning black before her. Odd phrases rang in her ears, she saw the face of the Indian woman Manuela, and heard her whisper of "*sangre*." "All night—you were alone all night," a voice beat at her memory. Lucian Carril's dark-gray eyes with their haunting familiarity rose before her.

Mr. Arden reached her before she fell.

What unconsciousness had taken

away, unconsciousness restored. As they bent over her the girl opened her eyes and stood erect, supporting herself by her father's arm:

"He was with me!" she cried piteously. "He was with me that night. That was the thing I could not remember. When I fell from the train, I ran a long way—I was frightened, and I ran until I met him. That serape—he wrapped me in it and took me in his arms, and we rode all night to the Indian woman's house. I went to sleep there, and when I awoke I had forgotten. He was with me, with me! I begged him to take me to my friends, and he did."

Stupefied, the three gazed at her, a score of minor circumstances recurring to bring conviction. Mrs. Arden fell into a chair and fumbled for her handkerchief. Billy stood frozen in his place, the water pouring from a glass he had snatched up to offer his fainting betrothed, and now held half inverted in his preoccupation.

"An' of course he'd hold his tongue," he murmured blankly.

"My dear, you had better go and lie down," advised Mr. Arden huskily.

Beatrice drew herself sharply away, her eyes flashing around the circle.

"But you will go and tell them?" she urged. "You will say he was with me all night? He must not be shot—they will not kill him for saving a woman. I would have died in the desert if he had not helped me. Billy, Billy, you will tell them!"

Billy opened his lips, but Mr. Arden took the reply from him:

"My dear child, if Lieutenant Carril is being punished for leaving his post of duty, it would make no difference whom he was with," he said firmly. "You know nothing of military law."

"But he could not leave me to die!" Mr. Arden cleared his throat:

"My dear Beatrice, a court martial cannot consider such things. We would expose you to much unpleasant comment by making this public, and do

poor Carril no good. No doubt he knew that himself, or he would have spoken to save his life."

"He would not," contradicted Billy flatly.

"Bilford, have you considered Beatrice?" cried Mrs. Arden.

Billy looked at the empty glass in his hand, set it on the table, and mechanically began to dry his wet cuff with a napkin.

"She's goin' to be my wife," he reminded, with a dignity of his own.

"I've considered her, an' I've considered Carril, who's waitin' to be stood up an' shot full of holes. An' I'm startin' back right now."

"Billy, dear Billy!" sobbed the girl in a passion of relief and gratitude.

"Bilford?" Mrs. Arden wailed futile remonstrance. "Are you sure it will do any good? Of course, if it will—But think of the newspapers!"

"That is it; will it do any good?" objected Mr. Arden. "Even if you get there in time, will they believe you? More likely they will think you framed up this story to save your friend."

Billy winced without flinching.

"I mean to try," he reiterated doggedly. "Those people love Carril; I believe they would hush up his leavin' his post if they knew why he did it. Anyway, Trix an' I will play fair—I'm goin' back."

As he reached the door, Beatrice ran after him, her slim, dainty body tense, and her brown eyes burning.

"The railroad," she panted. "Billy, you can go some of the way on the railroad. The rebels are not interfering with Americans. And there is no other way you can get back in time."

He kissed her heartily and patted her shoulder.

"Don't fret," he recommended. "I won't give up without fightin'. An' you'd better go lie down."

"Yes, I will go and lie down," she acquiesced, her eyes lingering strangely on his. "Billy, Billy, I am so proud of you!"

It was necessary to wait an hour for

the train, an hour which Billy found well filled. He had swallowed some luncheon, donned a conventional riding costume this time, instead of the chauffeur's leggings, and refound his guide and fresh horses. Being neither a soldier nor an Indian, he frankly yawned as he waited the last five minutes on the station platform.

"Wish I was goin' on a sleepin'-car," he mused aloud. "Eh, what, Juan?"

The Indian had touched his sleeve.

"*Nos siguen*," he informed his employer.

"Followin' us?" Billy turned.

A trim American apparition flashed up to the station; a girl in the costume appropriate for a Long Island hunt or a morning gallop in the park, was off her horse and beside the traveler. Behind her came more slowly a native maid from the hotel, also mounted and dressed for riding.

The cigarette suddenly fell from Billy Graeme's lips:

"Trix!" he identified.

"I am coming," she declared resolutely. "They will believe me if not you. Billy, if you will not take me with you I will follow alone."

"You know there will be a rotten row when you get back," he expostulated.

"Billy, I am coming. I am safe with you. I cannot bear it—that any one should die for helping me. And if—if what mama says is true, it does not matter much what I do now, anyhow." Her eyes filled impetuously.

Billy took off his hat and gripped her little gloved hand, his dimpled chin set grimly:

"If any one gossips about you, I'll do some shootin' myself," he promised. "But it will be a rough trip, Trix; the train don't go near the place, an' we'll have to do some ridin'."

She nodded courageously:

"I am ready, Billy. They think, at home, that I am asleep in my room. I left a note explaining."

"Your maid's goin' to stand it?"

"Rafaela is your guide's wife," she laughed hysterically. "Without her I could not have managed this."

"All right! I'll go see about gettin' your horses put on board; this town is awfully like America, Trix—you can get most anythin' done if you've got enough money."

It was dusk when the little party descended from the train at Mexcala. The trip had been slow and often delayed. Mounting, they left the diminutive terminal village and followed their guide into the strange, unreal wilderness.

Darkness overtook them in the teeming forest, but they did not pause. Up bleak, lavalike rock trails, across noisy water-courses, under cliffs, and beneath trees rustling with inimical life, they forged their way. Beatrice never complained or faltered.

In the midst of an ink-dark thicket, filled with the incessant roar of a cataract that plunged somewhere in advance of them, the guide touched Billy.

"Lost bridge," he announced with brevity.

"What?"

"The bridge is gone, *caballero*. Perhaps rebels, perhaps a storm. We must go a long way—three hours to camp."

Billy jerked his watch from his pocket with shaking fingers and struck a match. It was a trifle more than two hours to sunrise.

CHAPTER VII.

Dawn.

A DELICATE, luminous gray crept across the sky. A freshening breeze stirred through the forest trees, rustling like the skirts of a dainty woman. Don Martin Martinez, orderly to Colonel Zuñiga, veteran at the age of twenty-two, and expert in war, made an odd sound in his throat and brushed his hand across his eyes.

"Lucian," he stammered. "Lucian—"

Carril rose from the log upon which he had been seated, rolling a cigarette.

"Time?" he queried. "Ah, have you a match?"

His head averted, the young officer drew forth a silver monogrammed case and presented it. Carril struck one end of the double-headed wax Mexican match, lighted his cigarette, then extinguished and returned the stick with the scrupulous etiquette prescribed.

"Thank you," he acknowledged. "You make the occasion almost pleasant, Martin. Let me do my part as gracefully."

A dozen soldiers were drawn up in line a few yards from the two young men, facing a bank of earth covered with vivid, dew-wet flowers. Toward this spot Carril walked with controlled ease and took his stand before the bank, opposite the soldiers. He was in uniform; such humiliation as was possible had been spared the beloved of the regiment. Martinez followed him.

"At sunrise," he repeated nervously. "Not until then, Lucian."

"Time for my cigarette," said Carril, lifting it to his lips.

The frivolous word and gesture were belied by the steady, somber glance with which he swept the fragrant forest and paling sky.

He was dying according to his standards as a gentleman, but he was dying disgraced. And that disgrace was shriveling his pride, under his calm exterior, as vitriol eats into flesh. To stand before his own men this way was more intolerable than any death; almost with impatience he watched the sky. That sky was brightening. Gray was giving place to a tremulous blue, birds were calling to each other from the trees. A faint glow of ruddy gold suffused the east. Carril threw away his cigarette and turned to Martinez. The officer silently proffered a handkerchief, which Carril as courteously put aside.

"Excuse me," he declined. "I have looked death in the eyes before now, if the eyes were less ugly."

Martinez caught a swift breath, then held out his hand impulsively.

"We know—we all know you are no traitor," he gritted savagely. "If we had not been out in the desert, I should have believed it some woman. *Vaya con Dios*, my friend."

Carril clasped the hand, sudden color touching his still face.

"Thank you. *Queda con Dios*, Martin."

Martinez moved away. Carril quietly placed his back to the bank whose flowers were to take a brighter dye, and fixed his grave eyes on the east. After a few moments Martinez spoke, the sharp command of his voice muffled:

"Take aim."

There was the sound of leveled weapons. Carril held his unfaltering gaze on the horizon, where a long ray of gold had shot up, ribbonlike. Martinez's lips parted for the last command.

With a crash of splintering boughs, a horse plunged out of the forest and down into the little hollow.

"Stop!" a girl's clear voice rang out desperately. "Stop!"

Between the prisoner and the leveled rifles a rider dashed, and halted, leaning from the saddle toward the stunned officer in command.

"He is innocent!" she cried. "He was with me that night—with me! You will not shoot him; he has done no wrong."

"Miss Arden!" Carril protested, starting from his place. "Hush! Martin, I was not. Take her away, for God's sake! She does not know what she is saying."

Beatrice lifted her head. Her hat was gone, her trim riding-suit was soiled and torn, but her singularly vivid beauty glowed like a flame, and she fixed fearless eyes on Martinez.

"Señor, that night he left his post to save my life. You will not kill him before we can prove him innocent. Mr. Graeme is with your commander now. You will wait?"

"Señorita, I have no choice," demurred the officer, drops of perspira-

tion on his pale face. "My orders permit no delay."

"You will not wait?"

"*Señorita*, I cannot! I am not free."

"Then shoot through me," she defied.

"Miss Arden, go," Carril urged, catching her bridle. "Go, I beg. You cannot save me; leave me such honor as I can keep. You are mistaken. This is not because I went with you; it was another night."

The generous lie failed. As the sun rolled into view and sent its first level rays across the hollow, she looked down into his eyes and smiled exquisite, tender comprehension. All the memories of the long night spent in his care, awe at the sacrifice made for her, wonder at his courage, and pity for the thing she had not understood, met in that regard.

"Thank you," she said, and held her position.

"*Señorita*, you dishonor me!" vehemently exclaimed Martinez. "Must I use force?"

"*Señor*, he is innocent."

Martinez glanced from her to Carril and bowed.

"I do not doubt it, *señorita*," he said very sadly. "Allow me to lead you from here."

"No."

"Miss Arden," Carril said, compelling his voice to calmness, "you torture us both. What happens here is no fault of yours. Take my undying gratitude, and go."

She turned toward the soldiers and sat motionless. The resolution carved upon the rose-tinted ivory of her girl's face was as inflexible as that of the men.

Very respectfully Martinez grasped the bridle, taking its control from her. But as the horse followed him, the girl slipped from her saddle and still stood before Carril.

"*Señorita*," he implored.

She did not answer. From the direction of the camp came the thudding

rush of a galloping horse. Very willing the officer faced that way, to meet a soldier who dashed into the hollow.

"A reprieve!" he gasped, reining up to salute. "The prisoner is to be brought in for reexamination."

The court, hastily reassembled, sat around the table in the little hut, when the party reached it. Billy Graeme, hollow-eyed with fatigue, travel-stained, bearing a purple bruise over one temple where a low-swinging tree-branch had struck him, had told his story and was sitting on a camp-stool in a state bordering on collapse.

No one had expected the reprieve to arrive in time to prevent Carril's execution. The exclamation that greeted the arriving party was less of relief than of utter wonder.

Martinez made his report succinctly and accurately. A chair was placed for Beatrice.

"*Señorita*," Colonel Zuñiga opened courteously, "you have brought us some account of Lieutenant Carril's movements on the night of the fifteenth?"

"Yes," she made simple reply. "He was with me all night."

Carril looked across the room at Billy Graeme, and the eyes of the two men met, Carril's bitter with reproach, Billy's defiant.

"Will you tell us the circumstances, *señorita*?" Zuñiga requested.

"I have come here for that," she assented.

The room was silently attentive as she told the story; her soft, clear, girl's voice gifting the recital with a truth not to be doubted, her candid eyes fixed on the judges. When she ended, there was a pause. Billy had already confirmed her evidence as far as that night was known to him.

"Lieutenant Carril, is this account true?" Zuñiga demanded.

"It is," Carril reluctantly admitted.

"You went nowhere that night except to put this lady in safety and to rejoin your regiment?"

"Nowhere, sir."

"You had no reason for refusing to answer certain questions on your trial, except consideration for her?"

"No, sir."

Zuñiga and the prisoner exchanged a long, strangely significant regard, then the older man bent his head and fingered the papers before him with a nervous abstraction, somehow shared by his companion officers.

"Señor Graeme, we offer you and the Señorita Arden our thanks for your act of justice," Zuñiga said slowly. "You will permit us to afford you such hospitality as we can command."

Martinez came forward and conducted the two Americans outside. Beatrice and her maid were given possession of the young officer's own tent.

Billy, shown to another small hut impressed into military use, dropped on the first pile of blankets and fell asleep almost as he dropped. He had reached a point of blind exhaustion where thought ceased.

Hours later he was awakened by Martinez shaking him gently and relentlessly from side to side.

"Carril," rang in his ears. "Señora Carril!"

Billy sat up, yawning piteously.

"What's doin'?" he demanded fretfully.

"Señora Carril," repeated Martinez.

Billy followed the other's gesture, then scrambled up, blushing pinkly.

"Oh, by George!" he stammered. "At least—I beg pardon!"

A girl was standing in the room—a stately, black-haired, magnolia-skinned incarnation of Spanish loveliness, her magnificent black-velvet eyes resting on the American.

She was richly dressed in flowing black silk, and the small hand she extended flashed with jewels even at that hour and in that place.

"Señor Graeme, I am Lucian Carril's sister-in-law," she announced. "I am Faustina Carril. We should be friends."

She spoke in English, with an entrancing accent. The dazzled Billy articulated a phrase of acknowledgment, touching her soft fingers. He was acutely aware of his rumpled attire and that his yellow hair was tumbled into wild disorder instead of its usual sleekly brushed decorum.

"I have been with the Señorita Arden all the afternoon," she went on. "We have become friends, she and I. It is because of her that I venture to disturb you, not only to offer my thanks for all you have done for Lucian. What I have to say is not easy, señor."

Martinez had withdrawn. Billy recovered himself sufficiently to place the only seat in the room for the lady, his senses in a whirl. Carril's sister-in-law—she was married, then!

"If it isn't easy, can't I save you from sayin' it?" he proposed. "An'—I can take care of Trix, my *fiancée*; I think it was all nonsense for Carril to propose gettin' himself shot that way, instead of speakin'."

She shook her head with a melancholy smile.

"It is useless to feign, Señor Graeme. You would have done the same in his place. No, we must think—it is our duty to think of your brave and generous betrothed. I have seen Lucian and he agrees with me, however reluctantly. *Señor*, when the story of that night and the trial is told all through Mexico and your United States—as it will be—it must be told of Lucian Carril's widow, not of a young girl."

"What?" gasped Billy. "I—I—"

"It is hard for you," she sympathized, her superb eyes soft with pity. "But, after all, it only means a brief delay. To-night, after this marriage in mere name, you and I will take her back to her parents. At the end of a few months she can marry you, as you had planned. She is so white a flower, you cannot let scandal breathe upon her."

"But—Carril is livin', not dyin'!"

he exclaimed. "How could she be his widow, anyhow?"

The girl regarded him wonderingly, then put her handkerchief across her eyes.

"Señor Graeme, have you forgotten that Lucian's desertion of his post cost Mexico a battle, loss of property, and loss of life? Can that pass ignored? Could it in any country?"

"He couldn't leave a woman out in that desert alone!"

"Señor, señor, this is war, not romance! He failed in his duty; he must pay."

Billy ran his fingers through his tangled hair, dazed by points of view too foreign for his comprehension.

"You mean they're goin' to shoot him, anyhow?" he asked thickly. "Isn't there any penalty less than shootin' people in this country?"

She dropped the handkerchief and faced him, crimsoned by indignation and reproach.

"Señor Graeme? Would you have one of our name and honor sent a convict to a military prison? Colonel Zuñiga would not so degrade us; no military court in Mexico would put that shame upon Lucian Carril. I have not asked you to pity him; I have asked if you will give the Señorita Arden the protection of his name for the few hours left him."

"Miss Arden won't stand for it," Billy slowly declared.

His American practicality was in revolt; yet he could realize a fine, if alien, spirit in the tragic absurdity that had left Carril only the choice between his own life and the fair name of the girl who had appealed for aid in the wilderness. And that Beatrice should be forced, by that rescue, to marry Carril, seemed to her *fiancé* equally far-fetched.

"I have already told her of the necessity," Doña Faustina returned. "She will consent, if you do. You must use your authority with her. Come to her now."

The idea struck him as humorous to

the point of satire; it was Trix who had been in authority all their lives. But he followed the stately impetuosity of the lady's bidding.

At the entrance of the other tent Doña Faustina paused.

"I have not told her that Lucian cannot be saved," she confessed, her full lip quivering. "After all she has sacrificed for his life, it would be too cruel. I have told her that afterward you can get one of your American divorces."

Billy choked, speechless. But he found himself within the tent, Doña Faustina remaining outside.

Beatrice was sitting with her hands clasped in her lap, her apple-blossom coloring faded to a uniform pallor. She had restored her auburn hair to its satin smoothness; her chic New York costume was a dainty incongruity in this arena of passion and death.

"Feelin' better, Trix?" he asked.

She lifted her eyes to him, brushing pretense aside.

"You know what they say?" she questioned. "You—you have seen Faustina Carril?"

He nodded, looking at the earth floor, his hands in his pockets.

"Do—do you want me to consent, Billy?"

"It's rather a rotten mess," he pronounced unwillingly. "I suppose there's no use dodgin' that the newspapers are goin' to talk. You know I don't care about that, an' I don't see why you should. Still, I'm not pretendin' to decide for you, if you do care. I guess it's up to you, Trix."

There was a long pause.

"Billy, do you love me?" his *fiancée* asked gently. "I mean, very much?"

"Why, of course, Trix! You an' I are great chums."

"That is not love, Billy."

"It's a solid thing to tie up to," said Billy. "An' if I'm not good at talkin', I'll make good takin' care of my wife."

She rose impulsively and laid her hands on his shoulders, her brown eyes full of tears.

"I know it, Billy dear. Kiss me—
and take me to Faustina."
"You're goin' to marry Carril?"
"Yes, dear."

CHAPTER VIII.

The Road That Billy Found.

IN the bare little room where the prisoner was confined Carril and Billy Graeme met to grip each other's hands.

"I've seen rotten deals," said Billy viciously. "But this is the worst yet."

"You should have kept her away from here if you had to use force," Carril reproached. "Graeme, Graeme, where was your chivalry?"

"Busy payin' our debt to you," the other snapped. "How was I to know a court martial was a butcherin' machine?"

Carril turned away.

"I wanted to see you alone. There is something I have got to tell you, Graeme. This marriage with Miss Arden is a mere cloak, of course; you will take her away at the end of the ceremony, and I will be shot at dawn. I will ask Colonel Zuñiga to spare me delay, and he will do it."

"You know, even if things were otherwise, I could never forget that lost battle and our men who fell in it. Even in the city, before this was discovered, I felt that I had no right to live after they had died through my absence—though I would do the same thing again."

"I guess I understand, Carril."

"I love her. It is your right to know that before I go through even this farce of marriage with her."

After moments Billy moved to the door.

"Shall I call them in?" he proposed. "We're ready."

A mild-eyed priest, Martinez, and Billy formed the wedding party. Doña Faustina brought in Beatrice.

The ceremony was simple and dignified. Only Beatrice was ignorant of the shadow of death in the room.

When all was over and Martinez had accompanied the priest from the room, Doña Faustina drew the girl to her.

"You will come to my home, *querida*. Your father and mother will come to you there. It is no longer fitting that you and Señor Graeme should travel as before."

Beatrice answered with a grateful kiss. Very quietly she crossed to where Carril stood, and turned to face the others, laying her hand on his arm. Her delicate face was glowing and very sweet in its blended timidity and resolution as she spoke:

"Billy dear, we were brother and sister—I know now. If I am welcome, I will stay here."

Carril cried out sharply, blanched to the lips. Doña Faustina started forward, then turned to Billy, holding out her hands.

"Oh, forgive me!" she cried, the tears rolling down her cheeks. "Señor Graeme, forgive me!"

Billy had stood quite still, a curious mingling of emotions in his expression. With a long breath he pressed Doña Faustina's hands; then, crossing to the others, he kissed Beatrice's cheek and held out his hand to Carril.

"I fancy I've been guessin' this for some time," he admitted. "You know I'm not very good at talkin', but it's all right an' I'm satisfied. We'll come back when it's time to start, Carril."

And, giving his arm to Doña Faustina, he walked out of the room.

Outside, in the hot afternoon sunshine, the two stopped and looked at each other, confronting an intolerable situation.

"Señor Graeme, I salute a flawless gentleman," the girl spoke first, with the ceremonious dignity of her race.

Billy blushed furiously.

"You're givin' me more than I deserve," he protested. "An' Trix is right; I've been feelin' that, too. But you an' I have got to do somethin', an' do it quick. This comic-opera business has got to quit."

"Señor?"

He nodded, grim resolution on his plump countenance:

"Quit! Do you suppose it would do any good if I talked to that court about the nonsense of shootin' a good citizen because his duty was in two places at once?"

"No, *señor*."

There was a stump behind him; on it he sat down, heedless of possible insects, and lost himself in cogitation. Doña Faustina waited mutely, her beautiful dark face tense.

"How far is it to your hacienda?" he questioned.

"A ride of two hours. Our silver-mines are five miles farther west."

Billy blinked, vaguely distracted by this casual implication of romantic wealth, but pursued his idea.

"Have you a white man on it, a Mexican, who likes money, has got a brain, an' isn't too painfully set on tellin' the truth all his life?"

"You have described my overseer, Enrique, Señor Graeme."

Billy stood up, scrutinizing the sky.

"Good enough! Doña Faustina, if you can get that man here to-night, an' let me see him before he rides into this camp, I think I can do somethin'."

The afternoon passed with disconcerting rapidity for those who grudged each moment. Billy spent the time with Doña Faustina, explaining to her the art of advertising and the high responsibility of magazine covers. And he told her his ambitions, of which he had never spoken to any one until then.

At dusk Beatrice came to the couple under the trees. She was softly flushed, irradiated with happy love.

"Lucian has sent me to make ready," she told them, her eyes veiled behind their long lashes to hide their shyness.

"He says that I must go on with Faustina, and that he will follow later. He said Billy would explain to-morrow."

It was still very warm, but the American shivered oddly.

"No doubt he was doin' the best he could," he murmured. "Yes, you'd better be ready for startin' back."

An hour later Don Martín Martínez was gloomily smoking a cigarette before the temporary headquarters, when a travel-stained horseman rode up to him.

"Pardon, *señor*, is the honored Señora Doña Faustina de Carril here?" he inquired, doffing his high, silver-decked hat with the humility of an inferior.

"Her party leaves in an hour."

"I am infinitely grateful for the condescension of your worship. I am Enrique Diaz, at your service, the lady's overseer."

Martínez drew feverishly on his cigarette. His nerves were raw. In the hut behind him Lucian Carril was before the court for the last time. In the tent opposite Carril's wife of a few hours and his sister were making ready to leave him forever. Any conversation was preferable to thought.

"You have come up from her hacienda?" he inferred.

"No, no, *señor*! I come from far to the north, from Oro, a long journey." The man settled himself in his high saddle, smiling maliciously, with a hint of raillery for the supercilious young officer. "I was a mile north of Oro the night the rebels rode past to attack your worship's train. Santa Virgen! They were so close they might have touched me. But I hid behind a hummock."

"You mean south of Oro," corrected Martínez.

"A thousand excuses — north. I know; I was there. Of reason it would be so. The vile rebels would naturally pass around the scout every one knew was placed, so that he could not ride into his camp to give warning."

The cigarette fell from Martínez's fingers; he stiffened.

"North? They passed north of our guard?" he repeated.

"Of a surety they cut off your sentry, *señor*. They surrounded your camp before they attacked — of course, you could not tell from what direction they came. I saw; I can swear. But what

"Difference does it make?" he shrugged and laughed. "All is over!"

"Difference?" almost shouted the officer. "Difference? Come! Come!"

Languor gone, a volcano of energy, he fairly dragged the rider from his saddle.

"But, *señor*, I am not for this," resisted the man. "Who am I to mix in great affairs? I am a poor man."

"Have you told me the truth?"

"Maria de Guadalupe! What else had I to do? I meant no harm, *caballero*. I will not say it again."

In reply Martinez propelled him to the door and precipitated him into the room, ceremony forgotten.

"*Señores*, a witness!" he announced deliciously. "Señor Coronel, swear him—examine him. He was near Oro that night. The rebels passed him a mile north of Carril's post."

Carril wheeled in his place. Strained of face, the others stared. Billy Graeme thrust his hands into his pockets and stood up, blue eyes narrowed and intent.

"North?" Colonel Zuñiga echoed.

"North, *señor* — north. Examine him, I beg. Ah!" Martinez shook his captive joyously. "Speak, is it not so?"

"I am a poor man," fretted Enrique, sulky suspicion in every line of expression. "I know nothing of your worships' matters. I saw what I saw."

"The rebels passed north of our guard?" demanded Colonel Zuñiga.

"I saw them, *señor*. How should they go but to cut off the man who should have warned your worships?"

The simplicity of the thing was convincing. Rigid questioning only improved Enrique's account to clarity.

News of what was happening behind the closed door crept out into the camp, crept finally to the tent where Beatrice and Faustina nestled together in each other's arms.

"What does it mean?" panted Beatrice. "What will they do? Can Lucian come with us now?"

Before her companion could answer the tent was entered; Carril and Billy

Graeme appeared before them, unguarded and alone.

Straight to her husband's arms Beatrice flew like a homing-bird.

"Free? Lucian, you are free?"

He caught her to him and bent his dark head over the auburn one.

It was Billy who answered.

"Seein' he only left his post to save a woman's life, an' that his absence made no difference to the battle that followed, he has been allowed to resign with honor from the Mexican army an' go to the United States with his wife."

Carril raised his head.

"And what means more to me than life or freedom is that I have not the death of our men on my conscience," he said unsteadily. "We have the right to be happy, Beatrice."

"An' a good thing," observed Billy dryly. "I believe in people bein' happy. I guess I'll go have things fixed for our start home."

Faustina followed him with her swift grace.

"What does it mean?" she whispered, dazed, when they stood outside together. "The night that happened Enrique was in my hacienda."

Billy carefully put a cigar into its case.

"I guess it means that Enrique an' I are a pair of liars," he mused. "But if I were you I'd forget it."

Her magnificent eyes flashing through tears, she held out her hands to him.

"I will—I have! But you, you who are so generous, so wonderful—how can I ever thank you, Don Billy?"

Billy took the small, soft hands.

"You could thank me a lot more than I've earned by lettin' me paint your portrait. I'd like to have it to keep an'—an' look at all my life. Do you think your husband would object? I'm pretty straight, even if I'm not careful about tellin' facts on occasions."

The hands trembled in his.

"Señor Graeme, my poor husband was killed in the time of Diaz. I have

been a widow for three years. I—I should be honored to have you paint my portrait if you desire it."

"A widow!" gasped Billy. "By George, an' I was goin'!"

It was no doubt the climate. With-

out the least ceremony, he crushed her in his arms and kissed her pomegranate mouth fervently more than once. The pomegranate mouth fluttered; under cover of the darkness soft arms suddenly closed around his neck.

(The end.)

LOVE AND THE HUNTER

A SHORT STORY

BY HERMAN SCHEFFAUER

PANTING, streaming with sweat, his face and hands bleeding from vicious scratches, Frankland, looking more like a hounded bandit than a mere sportsman, blundered on through the undergrowth, lugging his heavy rifle. As the darkness increased, his determination to make his kill grew more intense.

What a magnificent brute it was!

He heard the monster ahead of him, tearing through the bushes, making his way up to some lair in the mountains.

For three hours that afternoon he had followed the brown bear. The animal had given him but one good shot, and he had missed. That had fired Frankland's fury, and his fury had fired his pride.

Plunging down rocky hillsides, between the spiny chaparral and stubborn manzanita bushes, clambering along the sides of crazy mountain torrents, and over the trunks of dead, gigantic trees, bursting into the sacred duskiness of solemn groves and wading through the deep grass of mountain meadows, he had followed the bear.

Now it was growing dark. He could see the great shadow-ocean of purple mounting higher and higher on the

wild summits of the Sierras. But on their tops the sunlight still gleamed.

But now he no longer heard the heavy-footed brute crashing through the brush, nor caught glimpses of his round, brown back heaving along between the tree-trunks. Yet to Frankland's sharp eye the spoor was still clear.

The silence was overwhelming, and the beauty of the sun departing from the world upon the mountain crests struck like a strange voice into his soul.

Suddenly, and with sharp disgust, he grew aware of himself as an infuriated, bloodthirsty animal, bent on slaughter—a dirty, bleeding, ruffianly young man, with murder in his eye, who carried a rifle of heavy caliber, and whose one ambition was to kill the bear, the stupid, lumbering mass of fur and flesh and tenacious life which chance had flung across his path in the afternoon.

Now, for a moment, the hunter became the hunted—the glorious mountain panorama some vast, eternal cathedral, whose pointed windows were pierced by a glory of rose, violet, and gold.

And he, Godfrey Frankland, was a murderer in the midst of all this majesty!

He paused—the poet who sings at